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MAGAZINE

Presenting a policeman with a nose for murderers . . .

THE SCENT OF GAMELLIAS

by JACK
RITCHIE



The first person with whom I associated the scent of camellias was my Aunt Mabel—a sweet human being, kind and considerate. She was often my baby sitter as I grew up.

And I remember Carrie Nelson, the first girl I ever dated, and she too carried the scent about her.

When I complimented her on the fragrance and remarked that I rather liked her choice of perfume, she informed me archly that I had

THE SCENT OF CAMELLIAS

an uneducated nose. She was not wearing a camellia scent. As a matter of fact, she *detested* the odor of camellias. They reminded her of funerals.

Yet I would have almost staked my life on the fact that she perpetually carried about her the aura of camellias. However, I did not press the point, though it did set me to thinking on the apparent popularity of the scent with so many people with whom I came into contact.

When I next saw Dr. Burglund for a routine checkup—he was one of those individuals who literally reeked of camellias—I rather experimentally complimented him on the unique camellia-scented after-shave lotion he was wearing.

He denied that he used any after-shave lotion at all, and that if he did he most certainly would not select camellia since he could not endure that particular odor.

Rather puzzled, I made a few other inquiries of those about me who wafted of camellias, and in every case the individuals not only denied that they were wearing the scent but insisted that they abhorred the odor.

After further thought, I decided to shut my mouth on the subject entirely and go about the business of growing up and being educated amid the unexplained whiff of camellias here and there.

At the university, I minored in the social sciences and as a fillip to one of my courses, the class was given a tour through our state prison.

It was there—in the prison courtyard—that I discovered that the incidence of the camellia scent among the prisoners was considerably higher than that in the general population—perhaps quadruple or more.

Our tour continued and we were taken inside the buildings, seeing the shops, the kitchen, the mess hall, and so forth, and finally, as the *pièce de résistance*, we were conducted through the institution's death row.

When I entered the corridor between the cells, I was almost overwhelmed by the odor of camellias. The scent was quite overpowering. And as I passed from cell to cell I realized that every occupant in the row exuded that odor.

Naturally I was thoughtful on the matter as we finished the tour. Besides the odor of camellias, what was it that all of those men had in

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They had all been sentenced to die.

Was it possible that for some fantastic reason—physical, psychic, moral, or whatever—I could smell impending death?

No. That couldn't quite be it. While our state still sentences some of our murderers to death, the possibility that they will ever actually be executed is rather remote. Besides, those prisoners in the courtyard who also reeked of camellias were not under the death penalty, though I supposed that a number of them must also be murderers.

Ah! Was that it? Was it possible that I could actually smell *murder*? Or, more specifically, that I could smell *murderers*?

The astounding realization that this might very possibly be true came to me gradually, but inexorably, and I was forced into some thoughtful reevaluations of many of the people in my past.

There was, for instance, Aunt Mabel, whose new husband had accidentally fallen to his death long ago as he and his wife strolled along the edge of a precipice. And Carrie Nelson, whose beautiful cousin had drowned in an unwitnessed boating accident while Carrie had managed to swim ashore. And good Dr. Burglund, who chuckled when he insisted that he always buried his mistakes.

I spent several days in a state of acute shock. I had never realized before the amazing variety of people who were actually murderers. And the fact that they were still blithely walking the streets indicated that they had gotten away with their crimes.

My nasal ferreting ability was clearly a gift and, it seemed to me, one I should do something about.

My decision to join the police force shook my friends and relatives—most of whom were in the world of academics. They fervently tried to dissuade me, but my mind was set.

In June, upon receiving my degree at the university, I was accepted as a recruit and sent to the police academy. Upon graduating at the head of my class, I was assigned to a patrol car with an experienced partner at my side.

My first day of duty found us responding to a fire alarm and we arrived at the scene of the blaze just as the first fire trucks pulled up.

My partner and I assumed the duty of crowd control, keeping the gathering spectators from getting in the way of the fire fighters.

The firemen, making their way through the smoke-filled duplex, brought out the body of an elderly man—a victim of asphyxiation.

There was the pungent smell of smoke in the air and yet, insistently, I also caught the odor of camellias somewhere near me.

I turned and surveyed the spectators and soon pinpointed the source of the odor. It came from a rather small middle-aged man who watched the blazing home with smiling intensity.

At the police academy we were instructed that, in cases of arson, the nonprofessional arsonist will quite often be in the crowd at the scene of the fire, reaping the enjoyment of his deed.

The look in the man's eyes, plus the odor of the camellias, plus the fact that the fire had claimed a victim, made me decide to speak to him. After all, if this fire was arson, as it indeed might be, then the arsonist was now a murderer.

I moved in his direction.

He became aware of me and turned, attempting to push his way back through the crowd, obviously with the intention of fleeing.

I caught him in a moment and firmly escorted him to our patrol car for questioning. I now noticed that besides the odor of camellias he also smelled faintly of gasoline.

He was quite terrified at being detained and in a matter of seconds he admitted that he had indeed set the fire but that he had not meant to injure or kill anyone and he was sorry about that.

My partner and I took him to headquarters for further questioning and he confessed to being responsible for a dozen other fires set about the city—none of which had previously resulted in any fatalities.

It was an auspicious beginning for me. I was commended for my acuity and I had visions of a meteoric career, solving murders right and left.

In the weeks and months that followed, however, I discovered that a policeman's lot is not solely involved with the crime of murder.

My duties consisted almost entirely of arbitrating family quarrels, making out accident reports, citing citizens for traffic violations, and similar necessary but hardly exciting chores.

According to my partner—a veteran of more than ten years on the force—he had during that time responded to only four calls involving murder.

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Nevertheless, I diligently set about the business of learning my craft. I attended specialized courses in the police sciences at the university in the evenings, and went about my duties cheerfully. What with hard work and a certain amount of good fortune, after four years of patrol-car duty, I was finally transferred to the Homicide Division as an acting detective.

During those four years, by the way, I encountered only two cases of murder. In both instances, the murderer was a member of the victim's family who was apprehended at the nearest tavern smelling of beer and camellias—a really dreadful combination.

In my new assignment as an acting detective, my first case involved what appeared to be murder during a burglary. When my partner, Sergeant Rolland, and I arrived at the Cape Cod-style home, we found a dead man in his pajamas on the floor of his living room. He had apparently been struck on the head by a small metal replica of the Eiffel Tower, which lay next to his body.

According to his wife, she had been to see a motion picture and when she returned home she found her husband dead on the floor. She also informed us that she was missing her jewelry, and her husband's wallet was gone from his trousers in their bedroom upstairs.

She was middle-aged and enveloped in a cloud of camellia scent.

In cases of murder, it is of course necessary to prove that one individual murdered another. However, there is an undeniable advantage in knowing *who* the murderer is before any of the evidence is obtained.

After Sergeant Rolland finished his questioning, I interceded. "Mrs. McDougal, you say that you came home at exactly eleven o'clock. How can you be so positive of the time?"

She dabbed at her eyes. "Because just as I came in the front door, the clock on the mantel chimed eleven."

"You came into the living room and found your husband's body?"

"Yes."

"Did you check to see that he was genuinely dead?"

"Of course."

"What did you do next?"

"I phoned the police immediately."

I turned to one of the uniformed officers who had arrived at the

scene first. "When did you get here?"

"At exactly three minutes after eleven," he said rather proudly. "We happened to be only a block away when the call came in."

The fingerprint technician approached Sergeant Rolland and me. "There aren't any prints on the murder weapon. It was wiped clean."

I looked at Mrs. McDougal, but she managed to look entirely innocent.

I resumed my questioning. "After the police arrived, did you leave this room for any purpose?"

She thought about it. "No."

I glanced at the uniformed officer again and he nodded confirmation.

"Mrs. McDougal," I said, "just what do you think happened here?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. But I suppose that a burglar broke into the house. My husband heard him and came downstairs. They fought and my husband was killed."

"Where do you keep your jewelry?"

"Upstairs in a drawer of my vanity."

I nodded agreeably. "A remarkably cool customer, this burglar. First he kills your husband, then he goes upstairs, removes your husband's wallet from his trousers, and searches until he finds your jewelry. Most burglars would have fled immediately after the murder and said the hell with the loot. Are you absolutely positive that your jewelry and the wallet are missing?"

"Positive. I checked."

"When?"

She blinked. "After I found my husband's body, of course."

I smiled. "You arrived home at precisely eleven o'clock. You saw your husband's body. You investigated sufficiently to be certain that he was dead. You phoned the police. You were undoubtedly overcome by shock and grief, yet nevertheless you resolutely went upstairs and checked your vanity drawer to discover that your jewelry was missing. You also went to your husband's trousers and ascertained that his wallet was missing. You finished all of this just in time to greet the officers at the door at three minutes after eleven. Madam, you must have been completely winded to accomplish so much in just three minutes."

She thought fiercely. "Actually, now that I remember more clearly, I came home at about a quarter to eleven or thereabouts. I must have *imagined* hearing the clock strike."

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"Mrs. McDougal," I said, "when was the last time you handled your husband's wallet?"

She seemed insulted. "I am not the type of person who goes through her husband's things."

I sniffed at the camellia aura about her again. "Mrs. McDougal, we are going to search this house from stem to stern. We will be looking specifically for your husband's wallet. When we find it, as I suspect we will, we will be interested in seeing if *your* fingerprints are on that wallet and why."

The wallet and Mrs. McDougal's jewelry were found in the bottom of the bathroom laundry hamper under some towels.

When our fingerprint man began dusting, Mrs. McDougal broke down and confessed.

She and her husband, in their pajamas, had been downstairs in the living room watching television. After the ten o'clock news, they had gotten into an argument concerning which program to watch next—her husband being adamant for the late movie and she preferring a talk show. One thing led to another until she picked up the replica of the Eiffel Tower and brained him.

The deed done, she quickly decided to make the event resemble burglary and murder. She gathered together her husband's wallet and her jewelry and hid them in the laundry hamper—she did not anticipate that the police would doubt her story and search the house.

While we booked her at headquarters downtown, I reflected that possibly I might have solved the murder even without the prompting of the camellia scent. And yet, perhaps not. Possibly the significance of the three short minutes might have escaped me if I hadn't known beforehand that Mrs. McDougal had murdered her husband.

During the next four years, Sergeant Rolland and I solved nearly ninety-six percent of our homicide investigations—an unprecedented high for the department—and I was promoted to sergeant. And I discovered that it was indeed true that in more than eighty-five percent of the murders committed the victim knew his killer and was frequently related.

If we did not find him still in the vicinity of the crime, it was usually a simple matter of interviewing all of the victim's friends and relatives until I found the one who smelled of camellias. And once the culprit

had been sniffed out, gathering the physical evidence to convict him became a routine affair.

Our few failures I ascribed to the fact that our killers were probably strangers to their victims and had simply boarded the nearest bus, plane, or train out of town, beyond the reach of my nose.

In the summer of my fifth year in Homicide, Rolland and I were called to the Blackpool Mansion on the lake front.

In the circular driveway, I parked behind the squad cars and got out. In the light of the quarter moon, I surveyed the main building and its extensive shadowy grounds.

"Rolland," I said, "murder among the lower and middle classes is essentially sordid. I wonder if this extends also to the rich."

Rolland extinguished his cigar and put it into his breast pocket. "This place is real class. I wonder if this time our murderer is rich."

"What difference would it make?"

"A lot. Rich murderers don't go to prison."

Inside the building, we located the tremendous living—or possibly drawing—room where we found the owner, an investment counselor named Horace Blackpool, dead on the center rug. It appeared that he had been brained by a gold-plated replica of the Flatiron Building. The probable weapon lay bloody beside him.

The medical and laboratory technicians arrived and proceeded about their work.

Mrs. Erica Blackpool, the victim's wife, had striking violet eyes that widened slightly when I approached her. She was in her middle twenties and enfolded thoroughly in the scent of camellias.

I listened to her story and then reprised. "You say you returned from a movie and found your husband in his present condition?"

"Yes."

"And you returned at exactly eleven o'clock? How can you be so positive about that?"

"The hall clock struck eleven just as I came in the front door."

Naturally I had been experiencing a certain degree of *déjà vu*. "Just what is your guess about what happened here?"

She seemed to study me intently. "My husband goes to his athletic club every Wednesday evening to play paddle ball with some of his friends. I suppose that when he came home he surprised an intruder.

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THE SCENT

They fought and my husband was killed. My upstairs bedroom has been ransacked and my jewelry is missing."

"You attended this movie alone?"

"Yes."

I glanced about the room. "Weren't there any servants around?"

"They all have their quarters above the garages and usually they're all out of here by at least nine."

A tall distinguished man entered the room and made his way to Mrs. Blackpool's side. "Erica, I do hope you haven't said anything."

"Well, just the bare facts. I couldn't just stand here and say nothing at all."

I regarded him. "Who are you, sir?"

"James Gobbert. I am the Blackpools' attorney."

Mrs. Blackpool nodded. "Horace told me that people in our income bracket should never do or say anything at all without first consulting an attorney."

"Mrs. Blackpool," I said, "will you please tell me again exactly the sequence of events, from the moment you entered the house?"

"Well, as I said, I got home just as the hall clock struck eleven. I walked into the house and when I passed this room I noticed Horace just lying here in a pool of blood."

"You approached close enough to be certain that he was dead?"

"Of course. And he was quite dead. As he is now."

"And then?"

"Well, naturally I called James and asked him what to do. He thought it over for a while and then suggested that I call the police."

"That was very good of him. And then what?"

"My next thought was that Horace was probably killed by a burglar. So I went upstairs and looked around. Sure enough, I found that my jewelry cases were missing."

"Don't you keep your jewelry in a safe?"

"Usually I keep it in the wall safe. But this evening I simply forgot to put it back in. Very careless of me, I'll admit." She seemed to step an inch or two closer to me. "Then I went into Horace's bedroom and it was a mess too. The drawer where he keeps his cigarette cases, lighters, rings, cufflinks, and so on, was completely empty and on the floor."

I consulted one of the uniformed officers. "What time did the first

squad car get here?"

"Three minutes after eleven."

Definitely *déjà vu*.

I watched the fingerprint technician working on the replica of the Flatiron Building. I doubted very much that he would find fingerprints.

I turned and sniffed at the camellia aura about Mrs. Blackpool for a moment. "How long have you and your husband been married?"

"About a year."

"How did you get along?"

"Just fine."

I gathered together the uniformed officers. "I want this house and its grounds searched thoroughly. I'm looking specifically for Mr. and Mrs. Blackpools' missing jewelry. When you find it, I want it tested for fingerprints. All of it."

I surreptitiously sniffed at Gobbert. He was innocent of the odor of camellias, which at least eliminated him as an accessory.

After approximately fifteen minutes, an officer walked into the room carrying a bulging pillow case, the contents of which rattled. "It's full of jewels and silverware."

"Ah," I said. "Where did you find it? In the laundry hamper?"

"No. Under some bushes just outside."

I turned to Mrs. Blackpool. "Madam, I am arresting you for the murder of your husband, Horace Blackpool."

She blinked and Gobbert frowned.

I smiled. "Mrs. Blackpool, you say that you entered this house just as the hall clock struck eleven. You then discovered your husband's body. You took the time to ascertain that he was dead. You phoned your attorney. After time-consuming cogitation he told you to call the police. You did so. And while waiting for them to appear you went upstairs to find that your jewelry and a number of your husband's things were missing. You then went downstairs and greeted the police officers as they arrived at *three minutes after eleven*." I sniffed the air. "It is quite clear that it would have been physically impossible for you to do all of those things within the space of *three minutes*."

Mrs. Blackpool became thoughtful, and then brightened. "The hall clock is an antique and doesn't keep very good time. I should have remembered that. The last time I checked, it was about twenty minutes

fast. So what was the time at eleven and before the murder?"

I dispatched the officers faster than a mini-fist.

The fingerprints on the murder weapon.

I was beginning to think that there was something about Mrs. Blackpool's

Erica Blackpool.

A uniformed officer.

I frowned.

"The prosecution says he's got a

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fast. So when it struck eleven, you see, it was really twenty minutes to eleven and I had plenty of time to do all of those things I said I did before the police came at three minutes after eleven, real time."

I dispatched one of my men to the hall clock. He returned in less than a minute. "She's right, Sergeant. The hall clock is fifteen minutes fast."

The fingerprint technician spoke up. "There aren't any fingerprints on the murder weapon, Sergeant."

I was beginning to feel a bit uneasy. "Well, I didn't really expect that there would be. However, I think you will find that Mrs. Blackpool's fingerprints are all over her husband's missing possessions."

Erica Blackpool smiled. "No, you won't, Sergeant."

A uniformed sergeant trotted into the room grinning. "We got him."

I frowned. "Got who?"

"The probable murderer. He was laying out there under the gazebo. He's got a broken leg."

I accompanied him back outside where we joined a flashlight-illuminated circle around the supine figure of a groaning man.

The sergeant made an identification. "It's Erasmus Reilly. He's been sent up a few times for breaking and entering."

I sniffed. Erasmus seemed drenched in camellias.

Perhaps it was because Reilly felt that he had been as good as caught in the act, or perhaps he simply wanted to get things over with and he rushed to a hospital where he could receive treatment for his leg, but he immediately launched into his confession.

He had been burglarizing the Blackpool home when Horace Blackpool returned from the athletic club and confronted him in the living room. There had been a struggle and he had struck Blackpool down.

Reilly had then grasped his pillow case of loot and dashed across the grounds, heading for the gate. Unfortunately, it had been rather dark and shadowy and he was not acquainted with the grounds. As a consequence, he had tripped over a marble faun and broken his leg. He had abandoned his loot and been in the long and painful process of crawling to the perimeter of the Blackpool estate when the police arrived and forced him to seek refuge under the gazebo.

I returned to the Blackpool house and Mrs. Blackpool.

"Well," she said, "am I still under arrest?"

I cleared my throat. "No. You are unarrested."

Gobbert snorted. "You cannot erase the deed, the calumny, the embarrassment with just a few words. We intend to sue for ten million."

I sniffed in the direction of Mrs. Blackpool. There was still the scent of murder about her.

I studied her as she studied me. Were we engaged in a combat of intellects? Good against evil? Was that why she had that disconcerting smile on her face?

I frowned at a new thought. Erica Blackpool claimed that she had been seeing a motion picture at the time of her husband's death. The lower and middle classes attend motion pictures, but somehow one does not associate motion-picture attendance with the upper. . .

"Mrs. Blackpool," I said, "did you have money in your own right when you married Mr. Blackpool?"

She nodded. "I had at least ten thousand dollars left in the bank. Lawrence's insurance policy was for twenty thousand."

I blinked. "Lawrence? Who's Lawrence?"

"My first husband. We were married four happy years and then he died."

I was beginning to see the light. "And just how did your first husband die?"

"He got this terrible indigestion and passed away within hours."

I smiled grimly. "Mrs. Blackpool, I am going to secure a court order to exhume your first husband's body. And what do you suppose our pathologists will find in his remains? Arsenic, perhaps?"

She smiled too. "Lawrence was cremated. I personally scattered his ashes over Lake Michigan on a brisk windy day."

I left the Blackpool grounds in a dark mood. While I accept the fact that a great many murderesses get away with their crimes, I still do not like to have it rubbed under my nose, not so figuratively speaking.

The following morning Captain Daniels called me into his office.

He bridged his fingers. "There is this little matter of Mrs. Blackpool suing the department for false arrest."

I laughed lightly. "You know how these things are, Captain. People get so emotional when they are arrested. They say things they don't really mean."

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"Well, Mrs. Blackpool really means it. She phoned and said that she is going to press the suit unless you go over there and apologize."

This was too much. Me? Apologize to a murderess? "Never," I said.

Daniel's smiled without showing a single tooth. "Either you go over there and apologize or I transfer you to the Traffic Department."

I drove to the Blackpool estate.

A maid answered the door and led me to a small room opposite the scene of the murder.

In a few moments Erica Blackpool appeared, evidently refreshed after a good night's sleep.

I took a deep breath. "Mrs. Blackpool, I humbly apologize for arresting you for the murder of your second husband."

She shrugged. "Oh, that's all right. Mistakes will happen."

I frowned and took another deep breath. There was absolutely no odor of camellias about her. "Damn it," I said, "what the hell happened to the camellias?"

"What camellias?"

"I mean the camellia scent. It was a veritable cloud about you last night, but it's gone now."

She agreed. "I guess it just washed off in the shower this morning. But I could put some on again if you really like it."

My mouth dropped. "You mean it washed off? It's not a permanent part of your personality?" I was aghast. Erica Blackpool was not really a murderess after all.

She came closer to me and sniffed. "Are you fond of cinnamon toast, or cinnamon buns, or cinnamon anything?"

I was caught slightly off balance. "Frankly, no. I never touch it."

"Good," she said. "Then it isn't something you ate." She smiled. "It's the oddest thing, but my first husband smelled of cinnamon. So did my second. And now you. And I just *love* cinnamon."

She looked up at me. "Now don't get all fretful and worried just because my first two husbands died. Nothing is going to happen to you. I just have this instinctive feeling that you'll be the only other cinnamon person I'll ever meet again and I'd better take advantage of it."

"Madam," I said stiffly, "what are you suggesting?"

"It's fate," she said. "You and me."

As it turned out, she was quite right.